

The Washington Post

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The Democrats' complacent budget plan

By [Editorial Board](#), Published: March 14

SENATE BUDGET Committee Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-Wash.) has now weighed in with a [budget plan](#) to counter the [House Republican tax-and-spending blueprint](#). We'll get to that Democratic document in a moment. First, here's a quick fiscal reality check, [based on an analysis](#) published Feb. 28 by economists William G. Gale and Alan J. Auerbach of the Brookings Institution.

There has been halting but real deficit reduction progress in recent months. The United States faces no imminent budget "crisis." Nevertheless, the economists write, "the 10-year budget outlook remains tenuous." Even assuming steady economic growth, the national debt in 2023 will be twice as high as its historical average, as a percentage of the economy — and poised to resume rising. That long-term fiscal problem, driven by the growth of entitlement programs for an aging population, remains unaddressed. Dealing with it, Messrs. Gale and Auerbach write, will take tax and spending changes "several times the size of those adopted under the recent legislation."

Except for the part about no imminent crisis, the Senate Democratic budget recognizes none of this. Partisan in tone and complacent in substance, it scores points against the Republicans and reassures the party's liberal base — but deepens these senators' commitment to an unsustainable policy agenda.

The Democratic budget rightly pushes back against the more mindless anti-government impulses of the GOP. It emphasizes infrastructure, education and research, which can enhance the economy's growth potential. It protects programs for the poor. It includes revenue as part of the solution.

Of the plan's modest \$1.85 trillion in 10-year savings, half would come from eliminating tax loopholes and deductions. The document admirably backs this goal with a sophisticated explanation of distortion and unfairness wrought by federal tax expenditures. But it is woefully imprecise about which breaks — including popular items such as the mortgage-interest deduction — it would eliminate. It alludes to economist Martin Feldstein's intriguing plan to [cap deductions and credits](#) but doesn't dare endorse it.

It is on the issue of entitlements that the Democrats' document really disappoints. There is literally nothing — not a word — suggestive of trimming Social Security, whether through greater means-testing, a more realistic inflation adjustment or reforming disability benefits. The document's fuzzy call for \$275 billion in "health savings" is \$125 billion less than the number President Obama has floated.

As for the coming flow of baby boomers into Medicare, the Democrats declare that "new retirees deserve the same promise of quality, affordable health care from which their parents have benefitted — and it is the position of the Senate Budget that they ought to get it." There's plenty of excoriation for the GOP "premium support" plan. But there's no explanation of how the Democrats would pay for their "promise" — nary a hint of the many cost-saving reforms that would extend Medicare's life without embracing the GOP plan.

In short, this document gives voters no reason to believe that Democrats have a viable plan for — or even a responsible public assessment of — the country's long-term fiscal predicament. Read alongside the GOP's own partisan outline, it leaves only a faint hope that sensible members of both parties, together with Mr. Obama, might yet meet in the serious middle.

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